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ABSTRACT

The author reviews the nature of stress and the individual's response to it and considers ways in which stress affects gifted children. Attempts to categorize or classify types of stressors are reviewed. Gifted children face additional demands of academic stressors (including unchallenging and repetitious curricula) and personal-social stressors (such as problems with socialization). The author suggests that three types of coping strategies can be taught to gifted children: somatic/physiological approaches (including biofeedback and relaxation); cognitive/psychological methods (such as cognitive restructuring, bibliotherapy, and situational redefinition); and behavioral/social approaches (including symbolic modeling and behavior rehearsal). Personality types and locus of control are said to influence the child's coping skills. (CL)

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Helping the Gifted Child Cope with Stress

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Paper presented to CEC/TAG National Topical Conference on the Gifted and Talented Child, Orlando, Florida, December, 1981.

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Helping the Gifted Child Cope with Stress

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Stress is all around us; it is present in all of our lives and is a universal human experience. We have only to turn on the radio or television, pick up a magazine or newspaper, or try some new product or experience to learn of some new kind of stress. Probably even the knowledge of new sources of stress becomes a source of stress for some of us. Losing a job, physical illness, taking a test, going to court, meeting a deadline, relocating, family discord are but a few of the kinds of demands and changes in our lives that are sources of stress. Even events and experiences that are generally pleasurable - a promotion, getting married, having a new baby, or purchasing a new home - can have stressful components. Knowledge of such factors as environmental stressors is increasing; we know that noise pollution, air pollution, and the potential toxic effects of environmental chemicals as well as various consumer products affect our level of personal stress. Like us, school-age children - particularly gifted children - are faced with unrelenting pressures and demands which often lead to stress.

DEFINING STRESS

Stress can be defined as a state that occurs when a person is faced with demands, either external or internal, which threaten him or her in some way (Darley, et al, 1981). Hans Selye, the pioneer in the study of stress, defined stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand made on it" (Selye, 1976, p.15). This definition views stress as a general reaction to such everyday activities as doing school work or interacting with peers or family members. The essential component is the requirement for performance or adaptation.

At the same time, the term stress may refer to external events which upset us or make life difficult; sometimes stress refers to an internal feeling of anxiety, pressure or tension, while sometimes stress means a physiological or emotional symptom which reflects unsuccessful coping with the demands that we face. This latter approach would lead to a definition which emphasizes that stress is the result of unsuccessful coping (Swogger, 1981).

The concept of stress as unsuccessful coping must be viewed from the perspective that success or nonsuccess is a very individual matter. The ways in which we perceive and label both the world around us and our own internal thoughts, feelings and sensations serve to screen out potential stressors and to define certain events or stimuli as potentially stressing. Each of us has our own way of defining potential friends or foes and dangers or adventures. Once we have defined or perceived an event or stimulus as stressful, then tension and physiological arousal and alertness are the usual mechanisms which prepare us to do something to cope with the situation (Swogger, 1981). Lazarus (1977) has suggested that different situations can produce different patterns of stress reactions and that different individuals are susceptible to different patterns. Both Lazarus (1977) and Cohen (1979) have emphasized the changing, dynamic nature of stress as the individual interacts with the environment and engages in various coping activities.

Another term helpful in understanding stress and one's attempts to cope with it is stressor. A stressor is any stimulus, internal or external, which activates our psychological and physiological coping mechanisms (Swogger, 1981). A stressor can be any stimulus, internal or external, the perception of which leads to the awareness, feeling or conclusion that we can not meet the demands or requirements called for by that particular stimulus. Antonovsky (1979) defines a stressor as "a demand made by the internal or external environment of the organism that upsets its homeostasis, restoration of which

depends on a nonautomatic and not readily available energy-expending action" (p.72).

So, whether a stimulus or experience is a stressor depends on the perception of the stimulus of the person, and on the kinds of readily-available, automatic homeostasis-restoring capabilities available to the person. Antonovsky (1979) and Swogger (1981) describe the reaction to a stressor as leading to a state of tension or physiological arousal, and that this tension state can have positive or negative effects on the person. Whichever outcome results, positive or negative, depends on the adequacy and efficiency of one's tension management capabilities. Poor tension management leads to discomfort, whereas good or efficient tension management leads to comfort; we can be either pleased or pained by the tension. If painful tension can be reduced quickly, then no residual harm is done; but if it remains at a high level, the result is stress.

It can be readily seen that stress is subject to individual differences and that the concept of stress is used to describe a variety of cognitive, perceptual, psychological, behavioral and physiological phenomena. The most constant or stable of these various faces of stress is the physiological one. In time of stress certain physical reactions and changes occur in the body; these physiological conditions are measurable and predictable. Increases in heart rate, respiratory activity, endocrine secretions, sweat gland activity, skin temperature, pupillary size, blood pressure and muscle tension are components of these physiological conditions. These changes occur because stress, just as danger or fear, activates our body's "emergency system" causing the sympathetic portion of the autonomic nervous system to take control from the parasympathetic portion and to over-ride the "everyday system" that usually directs our physiological responses (Darley, et al, 1981). This "emergency" reaction activates the endocrine system, particularly the adrenal gland. The pituitary secretes adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH)

and the adrenal glands secrete adrenalins and steroids. In the same manner that a medical injection of adrenaline or cortisone can produce the feeling of being keyed-up and excited, the natural excess of these stress hormones as a result of the aroused endocrine system causes us to experience similar sensations (Selye, 1956). We may say that we have the "jitters", or that we are "wound up as tight as a guitar string." What we are really experiencing is the so-called fight or flight response, the tendency to meet a problem head-on or to try to escape from it, which has enabled people to deal with threatening situations since primitive times (Vattano, 1978).

More elusive and confusing are the affective faces of stress: the psychological, cognitive, and perceptual aspects. An event or stimulus that is energizing to one person may be debilitating to another; a class assignment that is motivating and challenging to one student may be boring and monotonous to another and frightening and stressful to yet another. The perception of an event or stimulus as stressful is a personal one. Corboz (1977) emphasizes that stress is not a fixed state but rather depends on the personality of the child, the degree of development, and the environment. Mechanic (1978) concludes that an individual's stress reaction to a situation is dependent on the extent to which means can or cannot easily be employed to reverse the challenge, the duration of the experience, and the individual's involvement in the situation. Selye (1976) says that the transition between stressful and nonstressful is mediated by the person's cognitive appraisal of the situation.

RECOGNIZING STRESS AND STRESSORS

Stress is by definition and description, then, both personal and general, different yet similar. Its effect on the child is manifested in the same way; whereas one child may respond to stress by procrastinating, another may become tired and exhausted, yet another may become tense and nervous. Some other psychological symptoms of stress often observable in children are accident-

proneness, day-dreaming, distractibility, emotionality, frustration, inability to concentrate, insomnia or other sleep disorders, and school phobia.

Psychologists have become increasingly aware that stress is a primary causal factor in a number of psychosomatic or psycho-physical disorders in children. Psycho-physical disorders related to stress often are asthma, enuresis, hypertension, hyperventilation, menstrual problems, migraine headaches, tics, and ulcers or other gastro-intestinal symptoms.

While research on gifted individuals tends to indicate positive physical and mental health (Terman and Oden, 1959) stressors encountered in the traditional school environment by the gifted student probably have a profound effect on their development. Johnson (1981), citing information by Van Tassel, indicated that studies done in Iowa found that of all high school drop-outs 14 per cent had IQ's over 130, while in Toledo, Ohio, 58 per cent of the schools' gifted students were underachieving and that a substantial number were truant and were creating discipline problems. Lilly (1979) reported that in Pennsylvania an analysis of children referred by teachers for emotional problems showed that 50 per cent of those referred qualified for the gifted program in the state. Herczeg was cited by Johnson (1981) as feeling that many highly intelligent children, especially adolescents, have become adept at hiding their personal problems and use their intellects as a defense. These children on the surface may seem very mature, leading teachers to overlook evidence that they are suffering from severe feelings of self-doubt. The Chicago Public Schools found that children in the city's school program for the gifted scored below average on measures of social confidence and self-acceptance (Leaverton and Herzog, 1979).

Gifted children, as well as others, are faced with stressors with which they need to cope. Stressors, the events or demands that precede the onset of stress, may come from many sources and

have been shown to acquire their impact as a stressor from the child's perception of his or her capability to deal with the event or demand. Most attempts to categorize or classify the major sources of stressors use an internal/external model (Antonovsky, 1979; Lazarus and Cohen, 1977; Becker, 1976) with external sources deriving from events or stimuli which are environmental or cultural such as disasters, wars, death, divorce, loss of job, etc; internal sources emanate from such stimuli as fears, anxieties, self-induced and compulsive demands, underlying conflicts, feelings of inadequacy, to name a few. Other categorization schemes have cited environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal stressors (Swick and Hanley, 1980) and situational, habitual and temperamental (Prosen, 1980).

Most often these attempts to categorize or classify types of stressors have focused on traumatic events. Only recently have the effects of everyday events been studied (Coddington, 1972; Holmes and Rahe, 1967). This more recent research conceptualizes life events as stressors (Rahe, 1974) and has demonstrated that the occurance of such events is associated with a wide range of psychological (Dohrenwend, 1973) and physiological disorders (Heisel, Ream, Raitz, Rappaport, and Coddington, 1974). Coddington (1972) derived a questionnaire and scale, The Life Event Record, for ranking the most stressful of life events in the lives of children and adolescents. This scale and adaptations of it have been used extensively by researchers and show rather consistent stressful events, with death of parent, divorce of parents and marital separation of parents ranking as the highest stressors. Less traumatic but consistently stressing events are moving to a new school and/or a new home (Coddington, 1972; Monaghan, Robinson and Dodge, 1979; Sandler and Ramsay, 1980). Typical everyday events such as not scoring 100 on a test, being ridiculed in class, being sent to the principal, getting a poor report card, being suspected of lying, giving a class report, going to the dentist,

losing in a game, being picked last on a team, doing board work, reciting in front of class, having scary dreams, getting lost, and arguing with parents are perceived as stressors by a large percentage of children (Yamamoto, 1979).

In addition to the common stressors shared by most all children, gifted children can be conceptualized as having additional demands of a different nature. These stressors can be grouped into two broad categories: academic stressors and personal-social stressors. Academic stressors are those which relate to the formal instructional aspects of the child's life while personal-social stressors relate to parent, teacher and peer relationships.

A primary academic stressor for most gifted children is a curriculum which is often at best poorly developed, unchallenging and repetitious. In lower elementary grades the problem is intensified because the children have lower thresholds of tolerance for stress. Inappropriate behavior for the classroom such as out-of-seat behavior is often reflected in lower grades. Punishment for this behavior compounds the frustration that the child already faces.

Another academic stressor present in the traditional setting is the discontinuous, disorganized manner in which gifted programs are set up within the curriculum and with the regular classroom teacher. These programs rarely are integrated into the total curriculum program for the child. In some instances when the child misses regular classroom work while in the gifted group, the child may be penalized by the regular teacher for work not completed. Many regular teachers seem to view academic work completed in gifted programs as extra work which is not as important as completion of regular classroom work. The child is left with demands that he or she perceives as being impossible to fulfill.

Thirdly, the gifted child's unique academic achievements and interests may go unnoticed or unappreciated. Since the child's

academic accomplishments may not fall into the norm, students as well as teachers may not understand or appreciate the work. Poor grades or lack of recognition for superior work has obvious stress results.

Lastly, the gifted child is faced with demands, both external and internal, for high achievement in all school areas. This stressor, though on the surface an academic-stressor, is probably also a personal-social stressor at the same time.

Personal-social concerns may focus on peer acceptance as well as teacher acceptance and approval. Teacher approval is of critical importance to the child in the lower elementary grades, and a child who demonstrates skepticism, critical observation and unusual verbal facility may be threatening to the teacher. Teacher frustration may occur as a result of such things as the child dominating class discussions; this frustration may lead to the teacher developing responses such as ignoring or verbally abusing children in order to control those who do not conform to the conventions of the traditional classroom. Verbal abuse and/or ignoring the gifted child may thus act as stressors.

The gifted child, particularly the highly gifted, often finds it difficult to find true peers, and the lack of peers means the child may not learn to socialize through regular means (Zaffrann and Colangelo, 1977). Behaviors of the gifted such as the use of a large vocabulary with normal children may impede socialization. Boys who are interested in aesthetics often find that they are viewed as effeminate in their interests and must either attempt to cope with such accompanying repercussions or repress the interest and pursue other interests in which they may not feel capable of meeting required demands.

Youngs (1981) emphasizes that educators need to be more aware of the effects of the stress of everyday life events upon their students and of ways to best help them. The educational system and teacher training programs have done little to help

teachers with these issues (Zucker and Snoddy, 1979; Youngs, 1981).

COPING WITH STRESS

How then can the gifted child be helped to deal with the stressors and stresses of life? How have they coped or attempted to cope as they faced, with so little structured help, their personal-social and academic demands? How can they be helped to improve or increase the skills they have? Patterns of coping seem to take the forms of problem solving, bearing with discomfort, narcotizing, dysfunctional behavior, seeking social support, seeking professional support, and escape (Robbins and Tanck, 1978). All but the last of these seem to represent the "fight" dimension of the fight-or-flight reaction, with escape being the last resort. Typically the child uses coping approaches that are known as defense mechanisms and are labeled with such names as rationalization, projection, sublimation, displacement, denial, and repression. These mechanisms are defensive in that they are employed after the stress is present and, if relied on exclusively or too extensively, may fail to serve effectively or may lead to serious adjustment problems. More direct approaches to coping are desirable.

The most direct, and most obvious, approach would be to avoid the stressors and thereby avoid the stress; unfortunately, this is impossible. The child must be provided with other alternatives and provision for these should be made early in the child's school career (Youngs, 1981). Fortunately, other alternatives are available.

Coping strategies that have emerged are called by many names; review of recent literature finds references to such techniques as relaxation training, systematic desensitization, meditation, behavior rehearsal, situational redefinition, biofeedback, cognitive restructuring, and symbolic modeling (Cormier and Cormier, 1979; Garrison, 1978; Vattano, 1978). Whatever the name, the procedures fall within three broad dimensional frameworks: somatic/physiological, cognitive/psychological, and behavioral/social (Pfohl, 1981). The

somatic/physiological approach employs methods aimed at the physiological aspects of stress and includes biofeedback and relaxation techniques. The cognitive/psychological approach employs methods aimed at the thinking or perceptual aspects of stress and includes cognitive restructuring and situational redefinition. The behavioral/social approach employs methods aimed at the learned aspects of stress and includes symbolic modeling and behavior rehearsal.

Somatic and Behavioral Approaches

While these dimensional frameworks may seem very different they are actually quite similar, and coping strategies often involve combinations of more than one. For example, relaxation training, desensitization and meditation are different from, but related to, biofeedback training. All involve monitoring and/or voluntarily controlling physiological responses associated with stress such as blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension. Recall that stress is responsible for mobilizing the body's internal emergency system in the same way that danger or fear does. Selye (1974) formulated an explanation for the process which he calls the general adaptation syndrome (G.A.S.). G.A.S. stimulates the autonomic nervous system producing the physiological symptoms which result in the fight-or-flight response.

Research shows that people are able to regulate certain effects of the autonomic nervous system through self-management efforts such as the progressive tightening and relaxing of the major muscles of the body, and that this relaxation is incompatible with tension (Jacobson, 1938). This knowledge has been incorporated into many stress-management procedures and is an integral component of most of the somatic approaches to coping (Vattano, 1978). An example is systematic desensitization developed by Wolpe involving muscle relaxation, establishing a scale and a hierarchy of stress-provoking stimuli, and simultaneously maintaining the relaxed state and imagining stress-associated stimuli from the hierarchy, beginning

with the least upsetting and gradually moving to more upsetting stimuli (Wolpe, 1961). Relaxation approaches seem to work well with children and appear to be a highly useful method in helping them deal with demands (Gerler, Vacc and Greenleaf, 1980; Rossman and Kahnweiler, 1977).

For some people the practice of meditation can serve to counteract stress, and this method can be learned without expensive or elaborate training or equipment (Vattano, 1978). Gifted children have been shown to respond well to meditation techniques (Murdock, 1979).

Biofeedback, though requiring special training and equipment, is an effective way to monitor the results of the relaxation of stress and tension. There is, however, conflicting data on its usefulness as a method of coping with stress (Burish and Schwartz, 1980).

Cognitive Approaches

These approaches emphasize the thinking, perceptual and mental responses associated with stress and stressors. Recall that what is stressful for one child may not be stressful to another because of different values, perceptions, interests, personality traits, and previously learned adaptation skills. Whether an event or stimulus is a stressor or nonstressor depends upon its perception by the child. Since in most instances it is beyond the capability of the child to change the stressor, then it becomes apparent that a way to help the child cope is to alter the perception of the event or stimulus so as to reduce or eliminate its stressing effect. A method for accomplishing this is called situational redefinition or reappraisal. In this method the child is taught to think of a stimulus or event in terms other than his or her original perception; for example, instead of thinking of homework as being boring and impossible to finish, think of it as being a major component in a computer program necessary for the next space shuttle launch and that it must be available to NASA the next day. The technique is

similar to another known as cognitive restructuring which involves the elimination of self-defeating thoughts and their replacement with self-enhancing thoughts (Cormier and Cormier, 1979).

Another cognitive approach is the use of emotive imagery, in which the child uses his or her imagination to focus on positive, non-stressing thoughts while experiencing a stressful situation. This is a form of attentional diversion and has been shown to be an effective method of reducing stress (Bloom, Houston, Holmes and Burish, 1977).

An additional cognitive approach, one well within the capabilities of classroom teachers and parents, is bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is using books and other reading materials as resources for the child to help him or her understand and solve personal problems. The bibliotherapy program should be coordinated with the school librarian and counselor; successful programs require not only the reading of appropriate materials but also participation in discussions and counseling (Frasier and McCannon, 1981).

Cognitive/Behavioral Approaches

Combinations of methods, using one or more cognitive and behavioral procedures, are also available. These may be combined in a number of ways and are probably best illustrated by "packaged" programs offered by mental health services, school psychological services and private consultants. Two such programs are Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) and Stress Management Training (SMT). Though somewhat different, these programs include a cognitive component in which the subjects are taught the basic information about the physiology and psychology of stress, a somatic component involving relaxation training of some type, and a behavioral component including modeling, rehearsal and practice (Garrison, 1978; Cormier and Cormier, 1979). A great deal of research, although none pertaining directly to gifted children, attests to the effectiveness of these programs (Spirito, Finch, Smith and Cooley, 1981; Garrison, 1978; Jaremko, Hadfield and Walker, 1980; Worthington

and Shumate, 1981).

Other Approaches

Some other more conventional techniques are also available for adaptation to stress management. Individual or group counseling focusing on such things as values clarification, specific skills training, reorganization of the environment, time-management skills, problem-solving skills, assertiveness training, and establishment of personal goals and priorities is often used (Prosen, 1980; Sloop, 1980). Additionally, activities involving physical exercise and leisure and recreational activity are available; these procedures are often used in conjunction with some other approach such as a cognitive component (Williams, 1979).

FACTORS INFLUENCING COPING SKILLS

Several factors have been identified that seem to relate to children's skill at coping with stress. One such factor is the perception held by a child concerning the amount of control he or she has over a situation. This is usually referred to as "locus of control" with an internal locus indicating a perception of a great deal of control over the situation, and an external locus indicating a perception of little control over the situation. Persons with an internal locus seem to be able to withstand stresses better than those with an external locus (Lefcourt, 1976).

Another factor may be differences in personality types. Moracco (1981) found that individuals with perfectionistic attitudes were more inclined to anticipate events as stressful before they happened, and that the anticipation produced psychological changes characteristic of actual stress. Some children seem to have a constitutionally based difficulty in integrating anxiety and tension-producing experiences into their adjustment pattern. These children seem to become disorganized in the face of stress whereas some children seem to perform better under tension (Lourie and Schwarzbeck, 1979).

Finally, increase in family stress has been shown to interfere

with a child's ability to cope (Pellegrini, 1980; Worden, 1981).

CONCLUSION

Gifted children do have stress in their lives, and they do learn to cope with it. Their coping methods may not be the best or the most appropriate. Children do not have as many alternatives as do adults in dealing with pressures, anxieties and stressors; they cannot change jobs or take a vacation. Their primary avenues for meeting the demands are often the primary sources of the demands - the school, and their heightened intellectual abilities.

Stress is somewhat like an in-law who comes to visit and stays too long. We can cope with a short stay but a long one requires extra skills. We, as parents, educators and professionals, need to provide our gifted children with those skills.

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